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NPS Presence in Space to Continue into 2002

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NPS Presence in Space to Continue into 2002

NPSNW April 27, 2001

By Rob Bourke

Director, Alumni Relations

Five NPS graduates are on tap for upcoming space shuttle missions, NASA announced recently. Flying on the STS-100 mission, now docked to space station Alpha, 1987 NPS graduate Capt. Kent Rominger is in command of space shuttle Endeavour. STS-100 is the ninth International Space Station (ISS) assembly shuttle flight since the flights began with STS-96 in June of 1999, also commanded by Rominger. Since then, seven of the nine assembly flights have included NPS graduates on their crews.

Early in November, Lt. Cmdr. Mark Kelly ('94) will pilot STS-108 on a rendezvous with space station Alpha, making his first flight in space. On his flight, Endeavour will transport Alpha's fourth long-duration crew of three to the station. Among the three is NPS Engineering Science graduate Dan Bursch ('91).

"I think he was always an astronaut at heart," said Rudy Panholzer, NPS dean of Science and Engineering, who was Bursch's thesis advisor. "When NASA asked Dan to join the Astronaut Office from here, he wasn't finished. He didn't have his degree yet. I said there's no way we would allow it to happen that he would be in Houston (on time to report for his astronaut class) and not be able to graduate. We worked it out, he came back a few times, and he even got a course by long distance, not distance learning, but directed study."

Cmdr. Scott Altman ('90), who has flown two missions on the space shuttle, will command the first flight of space shuttle Columbia Nov. 19, after a year and a half long systems upgrade at Boeing's Palmdale, Calif. Shuttle factory. Columbia, NASA's oldest orbiter, is too heavy to carry significant loads to the high, fifty-six and a half degree, orbital inclination of the space station. Instead, Altman's mission will service the Hubble Space Telescope, inclined at a less demanding twenty-eight and a half degrees.

"The abilities I learned at NPS — to focus on the critical task at hand, prioritize your time, then apply yourself to solving the problem — have paid off," said Altman. He doesn't recall any specific part of the NPS program that lent itself to successful astronauts. "It's more the exercise in developing those skills rather than to think back to something I learned in, say, my differential equations math class."

Lt. Cmdr. Stephen Frick ('94) is in training for his first mission to pilot Atlantis in early 2002 on a ten day flight bringing new components to Alpha. He believes the kind of technical education provided here is essential for an astronaut. "If you just walked in there (on a space flight) without any technical background, you're just basically going to be sitting there getting some nice pictures and that's about all."

Frick will become the 25th alumnus to fly in space. Although NPS has no specific program designed to train astronauts, 19 astronauts, who are NPS alumni, current work in Houston and fly in space - more than any other graduate university can claim. In all, 34 NPS alumni have been selected as astronauts since the inception of America's manned space program. Two NPS alumni have walked on the Moon: Capt. Edgar Mitchell ('61) and Capt. Eugene Cernan ('64).

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